

A SECRET COURAGE

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*Time is too slow for those who wait,
too swift for those who fear,
too long for those who grieve,
too short for those who rejoice,
but for those who love,
time is eternity.*

—HENRY VAN DYKE

— ONE —

October 15, 1940

Will Fleming sprinted down the street. The soles of his black Oxfords pounded the cobblestones, yet his footfalls went unheard over the air raid sirens' howl. The acrid smell of smoke and broken gas lines from last night's raid, and those of the nights before, stung his sinuses and brought tears to his eyes. How many days had German bombs rained from the sky? Thirty-seven? Thirty-eight? The Nazi bombers swooped in just after dark, terrorizing the night. He hated to think how many more nights of horror they'd have to endure.

Would the Nazis allow the people of London no peace? Not until the hated swastika waved from Ten Downing Street. But the secret dispatch Will carried in his satchel placed Britain one step closer to ensuring that wouldn't happen.

The grind of German bombers roared overhead, and the air around him vibrated with the concussion of anti-aircraft artillery. He came upon an alley to the left. Will turned the corner and stopped in his tracks. Before him were the remains of an apartment building that a bomb had half destroyed. Open rooms displayed their disheveled contents where the walls were ripped away. He peered inside, having the disorienting feeling he had been

shrunk down and was gazing into a child's ruined doll house. Smoldering piles of rubble and stone blocked his retreat. The booms of more bombs exploding filled the air, followed by the shattering, tearing sounds of buildings crumbling throughout the city. Will had no time to consider the destruction or fear the enemy's closeness. The papers he carried were the only thing that mattered.

Behind him, his pursuers. Before him, a mountain of rubble. To the right a wall, but to the left a centuries-old arched entrance, a gate, and an empty, overgrown courtyard. He pulled and pushed the cast iron gate, but its only response was a loud rattling. *Locked.*

He couldn't hear the footsteps following him over the bombers' roaring engines, but he knew the two officers must have already rounded the main road to the alleyway.

Although the gate reached higher than his head, there was a three-foot gap between the top of the black iron and the brick. Not wasting a moment, he slung his satchel across his back and grabbed the top of the gate. One shoe's toe found the tiniest crevice in the bricks, and he hauled himself up and over the gate. Will dropped toward the ground but stopped short. The satchel caught fast, slamming him hard against the wrought iron, knocking the wind out of him.

Then, with a flip of the wrist, he produced a knife from his coat sleeve. He slid the blade under the strap, jerked it away from himself, and dropped to the cobblestones. In a single, quick move he grabbed the sliced strap and then slid to the side—behind the cover of a brick pillar—just in time. At movement outside the gate, he sucked in a breath.

"Hold up!" one constable called to the other. "He must have gone in this gate. There's nowhere else to go. Follow him!"

"You sure now?" The other officer's voice attempted to rise above the sound of the siren. "Shouldn't we give up chase? Head back to the shelter?"

“And let that blighter get away?”

A flashlight’s dim beam swept from side to side, and Will heard more rattling on the gate. Then a creaking as the gate swung open.

Drat. Will’s teeth clenched. It must have just been stuck, not locked. The two policemen hurried into the courtyard. Because of blackout conditions they carried only a dim flashlight, but their guns were drawn. They peered the opposite direction from him, looking behind a wide bush.

“Might as well surrender now. I’m not afraid to shoot!” the older officer called.

Will continued holding his breath, despite the aching of his chest. He only had one chance of escape. *Now.* Without hesitation, he pressed his satchel to his chest and made a break for the open gate. Rushing forward, he shoved the constable closest to him, hard. The man stumbled against his partner and both tumbled to the ground. The men cried out, and Will darted out the gate. Sure footsteps propelled him back the way he’d come.

The Underground entrance was not far. If he could make it to the Tube, he could squeeze in with everyone else running for cover and hide himself among the crowds.

As he rounded the corner, a shot rang out, and pain exploded in his arm. The satchel slipped from his grip, and moisture seeped through his coat. He looked at the dark liquid spreading through the wool, and his thoughts cleared. *I’ve been hit.* With the realization came the pain. Hot fire coursed through his arm. A scream flew off his lips. His vision blurred. Stumbling, he reached back for the satchel and then urged his legs to carry him forward. His arm felt hot, wet, sticky. Throbbing jolted with every step. He willed himself forward. If these papers fell into the hands of the British police, it would be disastrous.

Another shot rang out again as he turned the corner. It missed him. A whine overhead propelled him faster. Will dove into the

stairwell of the Underground the same moment an explosion filled the air. The ground shook. Heat pulsated, and blackness engulfed him. In his last conscious moment, Will tucked the satchel under himself, protecting its secrets with his body. He never imagined he'd die like this. With another man's name. With another man's secrets. With his country's fate on the line.



February 22, 1943

Emma Hanson sensed the air of expectancy that filled Danesfield House each afternoon as the Intelligence section awaited their heroes' arrival from bombing raids. Like knights of old, those with the strongest steeds returned first. Then through the gray English skies, the injured aircraft hobbled in, trailing smoke or wavering through the clouds like proud eagles with impaired wings. But it was the last planes, often arriving after dark, that caused Emma's heart to applaud. They sputtered in with wounded crew members and barely functioning engines, making it back—they confessed later—less by skill and more by prayer.

She placed her fingertips on the cold, paned glass and sucked in a breath, smiling as the first bombers—no more than black dots—crested the horizon. *Welcome home, boys.*

She watched from their workroom window, peering out over the vast country estate recently commandeered for the war effort. The staff had come to understand that she'd wait each day for the bombers' return. No one questioned it. Many simply believed she was dedicated to her job. How could she explain her dedication had just as much to do with her lost brother as the men in those planes? Maybe if she'd made different choices, Samuel would still

be alive. Her mother had said her impatience would get her killed some day, but she wasn't the one who'd lost her life.

With a distant moan, the first bombers grew larger, swooping down toward Benson airfield fifteen miles away. Emma imagined the relief on their faces as the pilot and crew saw the familiar countryside. When they saw their home base. Yet what memories did they carry with them? What images were forever burned into their minds?

On the occasion when airmen had visited Medmenham, she'd joined her coworkers in the mess hall, listening to stories of exciting victories and terrifying close calls from the dashing men in uniform. Only when she looked closer did Emma note the serious gazes that hinted of trauma behind their smiles, and she understood. She'd seen the destruction of the German countryside in black and white on a daily basis in photographs—called covers—and mosaics. The bomber crews witnessed it in color and experienced what the photos couldn't relate—the fear pulsing through their veins, the roaring of their own engines, the chase of enemy attack aircraft making them feel like sitting ducks on a pond, and the explosions of antiaircraft artillery searing their ears. How had her brother handled such an assault?

If only Samuel had made it back. The last rays of amber-filtered light stretched across the landscape, casting eerie shadows. Outside the window, bare, gray tree limbs stretched into the sky. The grand property sprawled empty and silent. Arriving just a few months ago, Emma had yet to see the color and blooms of Danesfield House's expansive gardens and the English countryside around it. The weather now seemed fitting. The icy winds, chilling rain, and muted landscape matched the forlorn ache within Emma's chest.

It was hard to believe her younger sibling—who had teased her, challenged her, and been her best pal—was gone. His last

note had talked of the friendships within his bomber crew and complaints of the chilly English air. He'd ended with, "I'll write more later, Emms." Only he never had.

She'd been in London then, training for her work with the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit, and her soul had matched the broken city around her. She'd hurried past the buildings lying in various states of ruin, while others—beautiful and untouched—hinted of what the cityscape had been like before the German bombers had delivered their destruction. While her body appeared untouched, her wounded soul was shattered within. *Out of all the crews, all the bombers, why did it have to be his?*

Each day that passed since his loss, and each photograph she analyzed, helped her believe she was avenging her brother's death in the only way she knew how—by discovering German secrets and passing them on to the officers who could do something about it.

Yet that haunted her too. Emma touched her fingertips to her lips and considered the destruction left in the bombers' wake. The piles of rubble, pillars of smoke, fires that consumed. Emma had seen it with her own eyes on photos on her desk. She knew more of the war in Europe than almost anyone—from the frontline soldier to the five-star general. More of the destruction. More of the cost. Her neck ached from looking down at the covers of photographs delivered to her desk every afternoon, and she rubbed it now with chilled fingers as the bombers landed in the distance.

It wasn't the life she'd envisioned as a child. She'd imagined one with a man she loved, tending a lighthouse, watching the coastal waters for signs of distress—but no one lived that type of life anymore. Even in her hometown of Tremont, Maine, the danger of storms paled in comparison to the worries of enemies crossing the waters.

She could never bring Samuel back, but Emma would do all she could to protect another woman's brother from the same fate. And at least she was safe. There were no threats to her here in Medmenham. No dangers except letting one's emotions distract her from the vital work she had to do while most of London slept, listening for the next wave of bombers.

— TWO —

Berndt Eldwin whistled as he pushed the broom in long sweeps down the white tiles, moving closer to the mortuary door up ahead. Inside lay the man he'd murdered the previous day, although no one suspected it was murder. And no one would guess he was the killer. In the life of every espionage agent, there came a time when one had to drop a cover. And to do that Berndt had to do away with Albert. There could be no loose ends as he stepped into his next assignment.

During the day Berndt had been Albert Ware, quiet bookkeeper and a spy with the German *Abwehr*. No one suspected, not even his landlord or his German handler, that at night it was he—not a roommate—who emerged again twenty pounds lighter with a thin mustache and quick steps from the small first-floor apartment. While Albert retired to bed early, Berndt cleaned the local hospital at night. It was there he saw the gurneys being wheeled in with unfortunate citizens and soldiers. He knew how the dead were handled. And he knew how to become one of them.

On a recent trip to London, Berndt had met the homeless drunkard, befriended him, and offered him a place to stay at his cottage in Henley. The man had enjoyed the bath and dressed

himself in Albert's clothes. The drunkard had feasted on tainted food, not knowing the meal would be his last.

The man's heart stopped near bedtime as he lay in Albert's bed. Berndt went to work for his usual shift, returned home, and slept. It was the knock on the door that had awoken him, Albert's boss coming to check on him, especially since he'd been feeling ill of late. Together they entered Albert's room and found the man lying on his stomach, face nearly buried into a pillow, without a pulse. What a shame such a good man's life had ended like that, alone in bed without a wife or family, and with only a roommate and a few coworkers to mourn his death. Berndt forced tears to prove his mourning. And tomorrow "Albert's" body would be in the ground, leaving Berndt free to step into his next assignment. He pushed the broom knowing today would be his last time cleaning these floors. The last day he'd have to worry about Albert.

The hospital air smelled of chemicals and death. Berndt had a hand in that too. Numerous injured Royal Air Force flyers had been brought in over the last few weeks, and mysteriously, one who'd been recovering so well slipped away in his sleep. Berndt smiled slightly to himself. Yet taking out one flyer here and another flyer there wasn't nearly enough. He'd bided his time, and now was the time to strike. He had his sights set on Danesfield House.

With a soft whistle under his breath, Berndt finished sweeping the hall, collected the dust and dumped it, and then set the broom to the side. His hand slightly trembled as he reached into his pocket for the key.

He opened the door to the mortuary as he had done for the past three years. He cleaned with efficiency as he'd always done, wiping down the mortuary table with wide swipes. Bone saws, embalming fluid, and instruments of examination lined the counter. Over the years he'd lowered himself to the position of

a servant, the whole time knowing the perfect moment would come. He wiped blood from tables, floors, and walls with a knowledge that soon his actions alone would save the blood of thousands of his countrymen.

Now, as he cleaned the mortuary this one last night, Berndt moved to the table that held the body. He lifted the sheet and studied the face. If Albert's boss had looked closely enough he would have seen this man was not his bookkeeper. But as Berndt had suspected, the man hadn't looked closely at all. Albert wasn't much to look at alive; who would want to gaze upon him in death?

Berndt returned the sheet and whispered a simple good-bye to the man who would be buried tomorrow in a plain wooden coffin. How long would it take for British Intelligence to discover that the spy they'd kept tabs on for so long had expired? They had no idea Berndt Eldwin existed, which was exactly what he'd planned. No idea of his plans for bringing glory to the fatherland by causing the Allied Air Force to crumble in his grasp.

As a spy, Albert had been faithful at record keeping for the führer—the numbers of planes and pilots, the numbers of workers in the underground machine works factory, lists of plane parts produced. But Berndt had realized long ago that records would never end the war.

And even if the right bombs hit the airfield at the right moment, the efficient English would be up and running again in no time. Hadn't the bombings of London during the Blitz proved that? Instead of attempting to cut off a limb, Berndt had decided to go for the brains. For even as he counted airplanes, Berndt had also counted the number of diplomatic cars that drove to Danesfield House in the nearby village of Medmenham. After hearing two pilots talking about some women they knew who interpreted photos at the large estate down the road, Berndt put two and two together. Not only bombers flew from the Benson airfield,

but unarmed Spitfires too. Photographic reconnaissance planes. And the photos had to be of Germany—his fatherland. Cut off the brains, and the bombers wouldn't know where to bomb. The Fatherland could spend the energy put into defending itself into cutting the throat of the island nation who deserved to swallow the bitter pill of defeat with their afternoon tea.

Today would be his last day at the hospital. Tomorrow he'd take on a new role. And the fact that a beautiful woman would lead him closer to this target was an added benefit of his new work.